Alberta

MUNICIPAL AFFAIRS

Innovative Housing Grants Program

GARDEN SUITE
DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

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Prepared by:

Manufactured Housing Association
of Alberta and Saskatchewan

The views and conclusions expressed and the recommendations made in this report are entirely those of the authors and should not be construed as expressing the opinions of Alberta Municipal Affairs.

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FOREWORD

The project documented in this report received funding under the Innovative Housing Grants Program of Alberta Municipal Affairs. The Innovative Housing Grants Program is intended to encourage and assist housing research and development which will reduce housing costs, improve the quality and performance of dwelling units and subdivisions, or increase the long term viability and competitiveness of Alberta's housing industry.

The Program offers assistance to builders, developers, consulting firms, professionals, industry groups, building products manufacturers, municipal governments, educational institutions, non-profit groups and individuals. At this time, priority areas for investigation include building design, construction technology, energy conservation, site and subdivision design, site servicing technology, residential building product development or improvement and information technology.

As the type of project and level of resources vary from applicant to applicant, the resulting documents are also varied. Comments and suggestions on this report are welcome. Please send comments or requests for further information to:

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing interest on the part of the general public, social agencies and government departments in garden suite (Granny Flat) housing units. They appear to have the potential to provide a new option in the spectrum of housing solutions available to the senior population. Garden suites may well represent a cost effective solution to the accommodation needs of some seniors in a residential setting close to their care-giving families. Such an arrangement would permit families to provide supervision, care and support to their elders in a manner which minimizes their reliance on social housing and medical programs while creating an environment that is conducive to the long term independence and well-being of those seniors.

The garden suite housing form may also have application in small clusters convenient to required services and in mobile home parks that offer appropriate amenities, services and maintenance.

This report examines the results of an Alberta demonstration project which gathered public comment on unit design, siting criteria, cost, ownership options, and comparison of this housing form to other forms of senior citizen housing.

2.0 BACKGROUND

The concept for this demonstration project originated in Australia where several thousand cottage units (also known as Granny Flats) have been sited close to immediate family members allowing elderly singles or couples to live near and derive support services from immediate family members. In the fall of 1985, the Province of Ontario undertook a similar demonstration on a limited basis, the results of which are currently being evaluated.

In September of 1986, the Federal Government through Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, approached the Canadian Manufactured Housing Industry to design, manufacture and demonstrate garden suite units across Canada. Within this context, and as part of the national demonstration project, the Manufactured Housing Association of Alberta and Saskatchewan (MHAAS) applied for and received financial assistance under the Innovative Housing Grants Program to carry out the Alberta component of the demonstration project.

3.0 DESIGN FEATURES

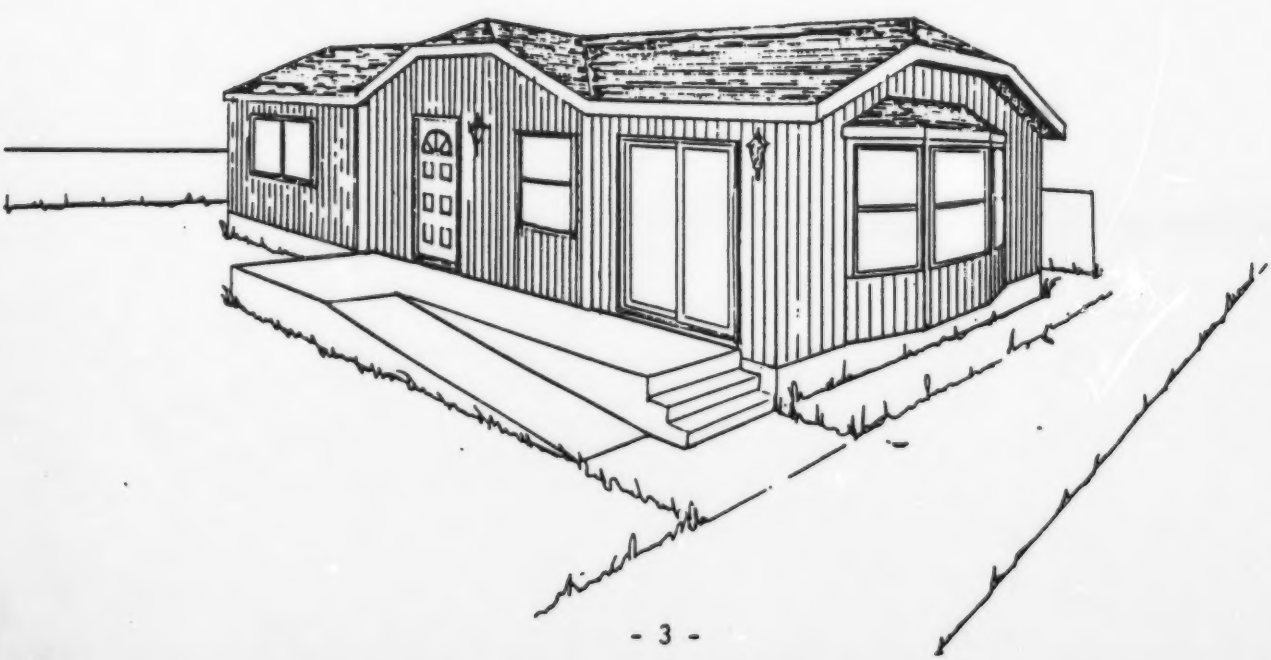
Prior to undertaking this demonstration, joint discussions between CMHC and the Canadian Manufactured Housing Institute (CMHI), MHAAS and Alberta Municipal Affairs produced agreement on the following elements of design:

- The unit would contain gross floor area of approximately 600 square feet and meet the basic design criteria for one bedroom senior units as defined under CMHC and Alberta Government design guidelines.

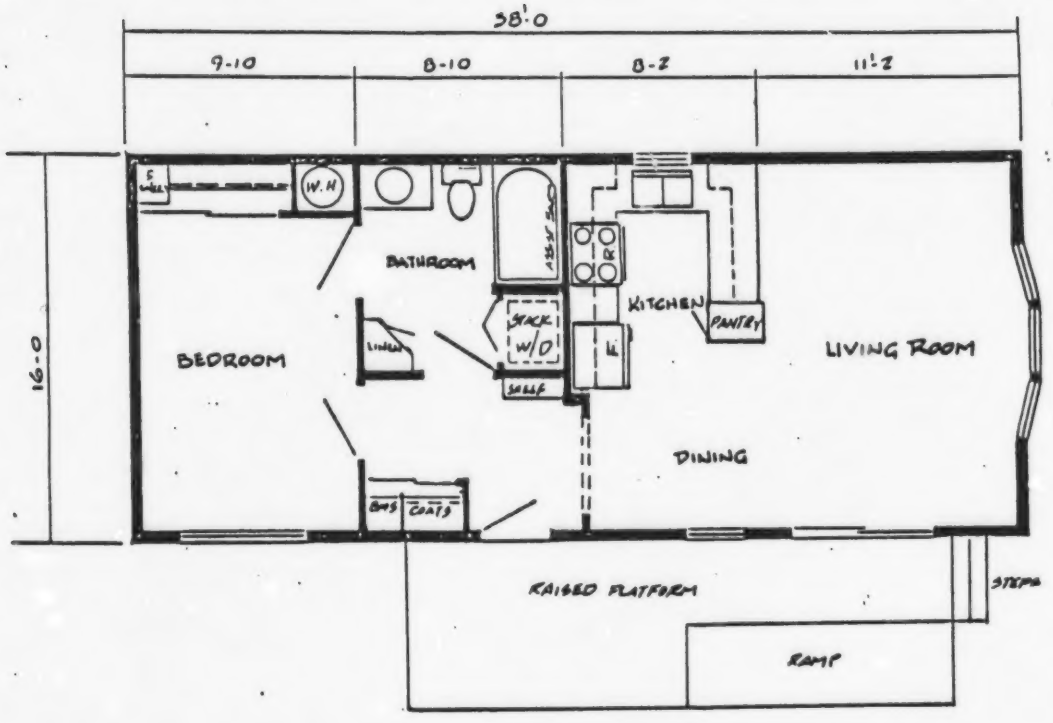
- The unit would be readily relocatable to facilitate subsequent moves and increase utility. CSA Z240 Code adherence was made mandatory.

- The elevation and floor plans shown below were accepted. The demonstration unit was manufactured in conformance with these plans.

ELEVATION



FLOOR PLAN


38'-0
9-10
8-10
8-2
11'-2
16-0
W. H
BATHROOM
LINEN
STACK W/D
SHELF
KITCHEN
PANTRY
LIVING ROOM
BEDROOM
DINING
BMS
COATS
RAISED PLATFORM
STEPS
RAMP

4.0 THE DEMONSTRATION

The series of demonstrations commenced July 3, 1987 in the Calgary Stampede and concluded on September 7, 1987 in the Edmonton Home Show. As required by CMHC, simple questionnaire forms were completed by willing visitors and estimates of visitation numbers were maintained.

	Visitations (Est.)	Completed Questionnaires (Approx.)
Calgary Stampede July 3 - 12	105,000	3,300
Red Deer Exhibition July 14 - 19	15,000	550
Klondike Parade, Edmonton July 15 (Parade viewers only)	115,000	0
Edmonton Inn July 17 - August 1	3,000	400
Whoop-up Days, Lethbridge July 28 - August 2	70,000	1,300
Edmonton Home Show September 2 - 7	31,000	2,500

Media coverage that we are aware of in conjunction with the exhibits is summarized as follows:

Calgary Stampede:

July 3 - Calgary Herald: brief summary of CMHC press release.
July 27 - CBC Radio: 12 minute overview of garden suite concept.

Red Deer Exhibition:

July 14 - CKRD: display interview and coverage for evening news.
July 23 - Red Deer Advocate: brief summary of concept and display in Edmonton.

Edmonton Klondike Parade:

July 15 - CBC and ITV television coverage in parade.

Edmonton Inn Display:

July 21 - Edmonton Journal: feature story with photos covering the concept and display.
July 24 - CJCA Radio: brief news coverage.

Lethbridge Whoop-up Days:

July 22 - CFAC T.V.: display interview and coverage for the evening news.
Aug. 8 - Lethbridge Herald: feature story with photos covering the concept, display and employment impact in Lethbridge.
Aug. 18 - CFAC T.V.: 17 minute feature on concept and employment impact in Lethbridge.

Edmonton Home Show:

Sept. 2 - 7 - numerous one minute radio spots promoting the Garden Suite for the benefit of the Home Show.
Sept. 4 - Access T.V.: 8 minute overview of garden suite concept dubbed over in Chinese.

5.0 SURVEY RESULTS

5.1 Unit Design

Throughout the demonstrations, staff members under the direction of the Manufactured Housing Association were trained to explain the concept of the garden suite unit and solicit feedback on design features and placement options.

The following design related comments were noted from large numbers of visitors and appear to be reflective of the public at large.

- The size of the unit was considered ideal for elderly couples or singles.

- The cottage look was soft, rustic and very much in line with what the typical prairie Canadian envisions for retirement living. The large windows with broad trim, skylight, wood siding, etc., contributed to a light and modern yet cottage-like character. Many people felt a low maintenance vinyl or aluminum siding in a wood grain finish would be a preferable choice to the wood siding utilized.

- In the interior, the 36" wide doorways throughout were considered ideal for mobility with wheelchairs, walkers, etc. The lever type door handles and faucets, bathroom grab bars along with the backlit flat rocker type light switches were considered sensitive and useful features for arthritic elderly people.

- The vaulted ceilings, kitchen skylight and bright vinyl gyprock were universally praised for contributing to a light and spacious yet practical interior environment.

- The baseboard hot-water/electric heating system with individual room controls was well received for the quiet, clean heat and zoning control features it offers.

In summary, the interior and exterior design features, high product quality and sensitive detailing combined to create a highly successful prototype unit.

5.2 Siting

Although the primary focus of the demonstrations was backyard siting of the garden suite, much information was assembled on the public attitude toward the garden suite as a housing unit under a variety of siting options.

It was anticipated the demonstrations would attract a predominently older audience where retirement housing would be of somewhat immediate interest. In fact, a large segment (possibly the largest) of the visitors were families with children at home and parents approaching retirement. Large numbers were concerned with the social implications of current housing options and fear that the government cannot continue to provide costly apartment units for the growing elderly population.

Backyard or close proximity to family members - Overwhelming support(1) for this option came from visitors of all ages. Having an aged parent(s) in close proximity but physically separated was seen as a superb option. Older people saw this as a way to maintain their treasured independence and privacy while being close to family for social and other support needs. Many commented on the traditional and healthful family relationship that would be enhanced under this approach.

(1) At the Calgary Stampede, approximately 90% of those polled supported this concept.

Unexpected comments related to the desire to see more of grandchildren and provide babysitting or limited child care for their family. Younger people saw this approach in the same manner welcoming the traditional family relationship and potential decrease in dependence on government service.

With regard to visual impact, most people felt the garden suite with its rustic cottage appearance would be a pleasant addition to their own backyard or that of a neighbour.

Comments were also made relating to potential increased neighbourhood security that could result from having residents at home during the day. In many young communities with both spouses at work, daytime crime proliferates. Having residents at home daily in backyard housing units could serve as a deterent to daytime crime which is often committed by teenagers.

In many instances people qualified their comments by noting that occupancy must be restricted to older residents so that alley traffic, noise and general impact on the neighbours and community is minimal.

City infill lots or clustered close to essential services - Many people without immediate family noted the housing form would be ideal in small groupings strategically placed near essential services. The foregoing could well have application in certain circumstances where AMHC is now providing small multi-family apartment complexes.

Mobile home parks where essential services are nearby - In numerous instances the garden suite was likened to the "park" units that are popular in many mobile home parks in Arizona, California, etc. A garden suite in a mobile home park offers private single family home living combined with security and a level of service normally associated only with condominium and apartment living.

5.3 Unit Cost

The very first question asked by most visitors was the cost of a unit of the type being demonstrated. Our staff was instructed to indicate a price of $30,000.00 delivered and set-up in Central Alberta. The stove, fridge and all features in the demonstration unit were included in the price. The cost of utility services was excluded and no attempts at estimating this cost were made.

With rare exception people considered the price to be outstanding considering the quality of the product, level of finish and numerous features included.

5.4 Ownership Preferences

Owing to the relatively short-term duration of the backyard garden suite application for a given family, the preference indicated most often was a rental opportunity. The foregoing would eliminate the hassle of acquiring and later selling the garden suite when family circumstances change. When discussing this question with rural residents living on farms or acreages, the preference appeared to be ownership. This group often indicated alternative uses for the unit when family circumstances changed.

Visitors familiar with Alberta government programs frequently suggested that garden suites should be owned by government and leased to families in the same manner senior apartment units are now handled. Similar rent geared to income provisions were often suggested as ideal.

5.5 Comparisons to Other Senior Housing Options

Frequently, comments heard from elderly visitors were variations of: "this is a doll house - I love it" or" this is what I always dreamed of retiring in." The garden suite truly gives the current generation of seniors the features they seek most in retirement housing. The following points were frequently noted:

- At my age moving from a private house to an apartment unit is a difficult transition.

- The garden suite offers the privacy I want and allows me to remain independent. It also allows me to live at ground level with access to green grass and a little garden.

- The garden suite allows me to live near family members where I can pitch in to help with the grandchildren and enjoy watching them grow up. When I need help my family is near to lend a hand.

Many visitors saw an apartment unit as a poor second choice, one in which their privacy is violated and they are distanced from family members. Many rural visitors referenced this last point as the reason why they would never move to an apartment.

Quite often the social benefits relating to group activities in apartment complexes were referenced as the only tangible benefit to apartment living. This statement was often qualified with the proviso that group activities did not replace the desire and need for ready access to family.

6.0 RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Subsequent to completion of the displays, hundreds of consumer inquiries have been answered and numerous inquiries from cities, towns and municipalities have been processed.

On October 19, 1987, the City of Lethbridge passed a motion asking the Alberta Government to designate their city as a demonstration area for the garden suite. The Cities of Airdrie and Medicine Hat are currently evaluating the garden suite for potential application. Numerous smaller communities are discussing application of the garden suite in place of previously requested apartment units from the Alberta Government.

Alberta Mortgage and Housing Corporation has analyzed the garden suite and designed a model that fully conforms with its design requirements. Public tenders will be called shortly for eight units for placement in two smaller communities.

Media interest has remained high resulting in extensive T.V. and newspaper coverage. This coverage has helped to keep public interest high and resulted in pressure being brought to bear on public officials and every level of government.

7.0 CONCLUSIONS

Based on the demonstrations noted, there is a clear demand for a garden suite or cottage-type housing unit for the elderly. Backyard application would appear to be the highest priority, followed by small groupings of these units on sites that are convenient to essential services and amenities.

The garden suite appears to be the housing unit of choice to many Albertans with the added potential benefit of shifting the burden of some social services to the family of the elderly person.

As compared to the apartment unit alternative, the garden suite appears to be highly cost effective offering savings of between 25% to 50% for comparable units. In addition, the garden suite offers far better utility in areas with uncertain demand or changing demographics. Owing to its relocatability the garden suite can be economically and quickly relocated when circumstances warrant, thus insuring near 100% utilization.

An unexpected demand for a unit of this type came from a number of handicapped visitors. As is the case with elderly family members, a time comes with young handicapped family members when the need to live somewhat independently is important. Many of these people can look after themselves in most ways however require a limited amount of supervision. In a backyard application the garden suite may offer some of the handicapped a low cost housing solution combined with family provided care. The foregoing could be a cost effective and sensitive alternative to current institutional solutions.

Planning and land-use obstacles currently prohibit all backyard applications of the garden suite or its variants. Perhaps the most effective way to deal with these issues is to proceed with demonstration projects in cities such as Lethbridge where need clearly exists and the City Council strongly supports the concept.